Density 21.5, As Corrected

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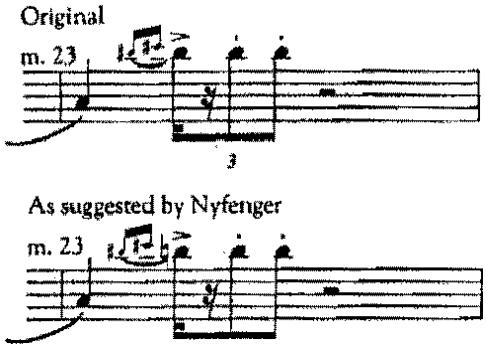
***** Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Article:

As a flute student, I was aware of discussions concerning a possible wrong note in the score of Edgard Varèse's *Density 21.5*. When I shifted my focus from the flute to music theory, Tadeu Coelho asked me for an analysis to support such a claim. A student of Thomas Nyfenger in the late 1970s, Tadeu recalled that Nyfenger corrected measure 23 so that the sharp attributed to the first grace note did not carry over to the Bs that follow. In other words each B after the grace note is B natural. Evidently Nyfenger received a call from Varèse after performing *Density* on a national broadcast. Nyfenger expected to be congratulated by the composer, but was shocked and offended (an understatement for those who knew Tom) that Varèse called to rebuke him. Varèse said that Nyfenger played a wrong note in measure 23 and Nyfenger responded defensively that he had only played what was in the score. "That is exactly the point," replied Varèse. "There is a wrong note in the score."



There are a number of fine articles about *Density 21.5*, reflecting extensive research and analytical interpretation, but to my knowledge, none of them deals with this particular issue. Because of ongoing debate regarding the matter, I made a theoretical analysis of the piece and have included a simplified version that appears to support the anecdotal evidence.

The piece is in ABA form and the A sections are based largely on a chromatic motive. For example, the three notes that open the piece are F, E, $F^{\#}$ or E, F, $F^{\#}$ in ascending order, and this motive is used in measures 1, 3, 10-11, 15, 16, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21, 21-22. The chromatic motive appears to be combined with another that uses the interval of major second followed by a half-step (G, A, B^{b} in measures 6-7; B^{b}, C, D^{b} in measures 8-9; and A, B, $G^{\#}$ in measure 19). These chromatic motives are followed by a tritone that provides a cadence at the ends of phrases. Only measures 2, 4, 8, 11, 14, and possibly 23 (the measure in question) depart from a chromatic linear motive, and among those measures, only 2, 8, and 14 are entirely without chromaticism. The chromatic motive comprises three distinct notes. If the sharp of the grace notes in measure 23 is carried to the ensuing Bs, it results in a motive of only two distinct notes, the $B^{\#}$ and the B natural, but if the sharp is not carried over to the Bs, the motive is clearly the three chromatic half-steps observed as the main idea of the A section. This would seem to indicate that the absence of a natural sign in front of the Bs is a typographical error. Another argument for this chromatic motive is the fact that each main section uses a distinct note of the original motive. F is the first note of measure 1, E is the first note in measure 24 (the beginning of the B section), and at the return of the A section in measure 41, $F^{\#}$ is the first note.

The B section introduces a minor third motive (E-C$^{\#}$) but the chromatic motives are not forgotten. They reap. pear in measure 25 (C$^{\#}$, E, D), the climactic measure 29, and measures 31, 38, 39, 40, 53-54, and 54-55. What distinguishes the B section is the combination of the chromatic motive with perfect fifths in measures 32-35 in a non-cadential way. At measure 41 the A section returns with the original motive transposed by one half-step, the minor third of the B section (measures 47-49), the tritone (measures 51- 52), and the perfect fifth (measure 53), in a fusion of elements that brings the piece to completion. Also, the very first note of the piece (F), combined with the very last note of the piece (B), is the same as the melodic tritone that concludes the work.

The economy of elements used in this piece seems to confirm the anecdotal evidence for B naturals in measure 23 rather than the B$^{\#}$s most performers play. If publishers can be persuaded it will spare the next generation of flutists some embarrassment and unnecessary confusion.